

Epiphany, Transformation, and Communication in D. H. Lawrence's Short Stories: With Particular Reference to "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter"

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0. Introduction

In many of D. H. Lawrence's novels, there appear male and female characters who suffer from being unable to understand each other emotionally or physically. Although they are strongly concerned about each other, the differences between them which include habits, values, or physical sensibilities and much more, produce discrepancies and antagonisms. In this paper, I will attempt to define the limits of the difference represented by social position in Lawrence's cross-class romances, as one might call them, which are the author's speciality. In the longer novels, there are many cases in which relationships finally collapse after much meandering and the characters fail to get any closer to agreement. However, in some of the short stories, there is a moment when the relationship makes a dramatic turn. Through suddenly awakening in their inner selves, their senses drastically change and they accept each other by undergoing a complete change from their initial rejection. The peculiarity of this process is that the awakening and the alteration happen in a strange sense of ecstasy which does not have a clear logic. Generally, there is a reason for people's awareness and a motivation for a change. However, what appear in Lawrence's fictions are incidents of epiphany in which one's cognition and values change to their opposites all of a sudden. The etymological origin of the word "Epiphany" is a manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles; however, as Harrison (2008) observes, its meaning is well-known to have been extended by James Joyce to refer to a modernistic technique of expression in the realm of literature. It means "a 'sudden spiritual manifestation' in which the 'whatness' of an action or an object appears radiant to an observer" and "the term is today loosely applied to any moment of sudden and great revelation in which a character gains a special insight into his life" (Harrison 2008: 78). Through experiencing a mystical revelation, the characters reach an unknown reality by suddenly loving or deeply forgiving someone. The illogicality of epiphany which is "out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it" (Beja 1971: 18) is

often connected to the belief in touch in Lawrence's stories.¹ Lawrence is a novelist who greatly cherishes physical sensation, and it has been recognized that he depicts human beings' inner awakening as arising from the shock of touching others' bodies. "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter" (1922),² which I discuss in this paper, has been understood as a typical example of this. However, the point I want to focus on is that the touch of flesh is not the highest source of the reformation of consciousness.

The epiphany involved in this awakening advances the process of the transformation of consciousness and thus allows one to receive the other, though this phenomenon does not conclude with the subject. It fascinates the object and triggers him or her to experience the same striking change or more than that, in consequence of the infection. This transmission is depicted earlier than the moment of touch in "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter". By freeing their selves in ecstasy, the characters of both sexes lose consciousness of the external reality and an unknown communication opens. It can be identified with the communication in the condition of ecstatic "non-knowledge" which Georges Bataille has postulated. Furthermore, the effect of tears as a substance which conveys one's ecstasy is discussed in this paper by citing one of Lawrence's earliest short stories, "Second-Best" (1912).³ This little-known sketch will gain a vivid quality as a tale of awakening and acceptance when it is read from the perspective of the liberation from the inflexible old ego and the interchange of ecstasy between the newly born lovers. On the whole, this paper argues that the transformation of consciousness, caused by epiphany, is a miraculous method for Lawrence's cross-class romance that resolves the characters' disharmony which cannot be dispelled unless they possess knowledge or reason.

1. Epiphany in "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter"

As Janice H. Harris claims, the short story "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter" "is perhaps Lawrence's best-known tale of resurrection" (Harris 1984: 125). One morning, the Pervin brothers, who are doomed to separation because of bankruptcy, were discussing

¹ The irrationality as escape from logos is related to the physical contact: "The mystery [pursued in Lawrence's fictions] was *not to be apprehended or explained in terms of reason and logic – that was the way to kill it*. It could be experienced only by direct intuition, transmitted *only by touch*" (Allen 2003: 120, my italics).

² The text cited in this paper is from the collection of Lawrence's short stories, *England, My England*, hereafter abbreviated as *EME*.

³ The text cited in this paper is from the collection of Lawrence's short stories, *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*, hereafter abbreviated as *PO*.

what to do with their lives. In contrast with the flippant brothers, their sister Mabel does not have any attachment in life and remains tongue-tied however persistently the brothers ask about her future prospects. Since her only emotional support was her mother's tomb, she had a yearning for death. A young doctor, Jack Fergusson, who is on close terms with the brothers, stops by and breaks into the conversation, though Mabel does not care to answer his words and her "steady, dangerous eyes" make "him uncomfortable, unsettling his superficial ease" (*EME*: 141). After his patients' house calls, Fergusson witnesses her gradually sinking unconsciously into the pond near the cemetery. Being all in a flurry, he rescues her from being drowned due to his vocational mission and takes her back to her house, takes off her wet clothes, and lays her down. Mabel comes to her senses, and from the moment when she notices that he had removed her clothes, she repeatedly confirms that he loves her. Fergusson feels shocked by this outrageous leap in logic, and the more he thinks about the difference in their social status, the more he feels repulsion at her sudden falling in love with him and tries to resist. However, while he is touching her body and gazing at the tears shading her cheeks, what is strange and inexplicable is that he madly loves her. And while Mabel contrastingly regains her objective consciousness, it is Fergusson who proposes marriage to her in a delirious manner.

This story has been positioned in the tradition of sleeping-beauty fiction in terms of the aspect of intuitively falling in love, due to the single reason of Mabel being pulled back to life from the temporary state of death⁴ – in other words, the idea that a mental arousal is caused by the physical resurrection. Haruo Tetsumura suggests that "The expression of Mabel's demand which leaves out the procedure of thought, [...] is an expression of illogicality in the moment of crisis" (1984: 201, my translation), and he regards this experience of revelation as an epiphany which transcends a realistic chain of reasoning. Moreover, what is truly interesting is that not only Mabel but also Fergusson, who once had an adamant and cynical stronghold of rational consciousness, experiences an epiphany which causes his perspective to be altered by 180 degrees. As a consequence, he helplessly loves the horse-dealer's daughter who has belonged to a different social group from him, and whom he had never desired. However, Tetsumura argues that the immediate cause of Fergusson's epiphany is the touch of the girl's skin:

⁴ Harry T. Moore (1954) is thought to be the first critic who claimed to find the quality of the sleeping-beauty in this tale (summarized in Kearny (1998)).

“Although there was nothing which predicted such a deep connection between the couple, the distance between them does not even matter before the ‘physical contact’” (1984: 202, my translation). Hence, he concludes that the couple has become awakened to love by their mutual physical resuscitation.⁵ One scene in particular is supposed to be a crucial turning point, in which an electric shock runs through Fergusson’s hand when he touches Mabel’s shoulders: “A flame seemed to burn the hand that grasped her soft shoulder”, and notwithstanding his horror of and resistance to allowing himself to succumb to her, “With an inward groan he gave way, and let his heart yield towards her” (*EME*: 149). Many scholars think that it is this tactile perception that makes Fergusson excessively accept Mabel as if he had become quite another person. For instance, Kazuo Ueda (2000) comments in the afterword of a new collection of Lawrence’s short stories that “In the moment when his hand touches her shoulders, everything is solved. The touch explodes his unconscious desire, revives the deathlike girl, and makes the young doctor come to life who was sinking in the dull life” (2000: 496, my translation). From such descriptions of the inner alteration, a theory has been established that the act of touch proceeds from consciousness even by betraying human beings’ recognition or self-awareness.⁶ Abbie Garrington writes that skin sensation is used “as a means of epistemological investigation” and that many of Lawrence’s works “can be seen to link touch to salving, and thence salvation” (2013: 156). She also explains that they offer “a truly corporeal corpus, deeply invested in the experiences of the somatic system, and the philosophical and spiritual insight which consideration of the human body may bring” (2013: 155).

However, if the tale is only a double sleeping-beauty story, it implies that it is based on the unaffectionate lifesaving treatment caused by the one-sided physical touch. If the characters are drunk with their respective solitary sexual gratification which happens in a time lag, it is as if there is no fragment of communication. As a matter of course, the

⁵ Taking over Moore’s idea of the sleeping-beauty model, Sarah Betsky-Zwei (1973) and Keith Cushman (1980) were the first critics to recognize that both Mabel and Fergusson have undergone an awakening. For a chronological summary of the studies of this tale, including these discussions, see Martin F. Kearny (1998).

⁶ For example, a similar theme can be seen in the other short story “Hadrian [You Touched Me]” (1920). From the incident of being touched by his step-sister when asleep, the male character, Hadrian, is firmly dominated by a thought of rightfully loving her, which transcends his own emotion. (Hence, the tale is also considered as a kind of sleeping-beauty story, in which the sex roles are reversed.) In this way, in Lawrence’s fiction, it is not unusual for the act of touching the other’s body as initiating an epiphanic turning point which gives an entirely new value by enfeebling one’s hardened will.

communication does not rely on words in this story, and accordingly the critics seem to share a preconception that the action is a necessary requirement as the substitute for logos in order to solve the incomprehensibility of the events. Rather, it can be said that a communication which proceeds from both action and words is the clue to this tale: the delivery of an ecstasy from Mabel to Fergusson has ultimately awakened him. When Mabel asked him whether she is out of her mind now, he tells her that she is not, though nevertheless, he gets afraid “because he felt dazed, and *felt dimly that her power was stronger than his, in this issue*” (EME: 147, my italics). Although he wishes to change his clothes which became filthy from the water in the pond, Mabel’s emboldened aura is stronger than that. It seemed to hold “another desire” (EME: 147) for him, making his body heat up from inside as if it surpasses the cutaneous displeasure. This scene of transmission appears long before the one in which they actually touch each other’s bodies.

2. From inner experience to the field of communication

It can be said that the background of the ecstatic transmission is the quality of something out-of-the-ordinary. The extraordinariness has been created by the characters’ respective alterations of their standpoints from death to life. In addition to Mabel who was living in a half deathlike condition, Fergusson also has been feeling the lack of stability in his life. Despite having a profession as a doctor, he was actually worn out by being employed by and providing a service to the local population like a “slave to the countryside” (EME: 143). However, it is illustrated that encountering the life of the working class and being involved in its roughness was secretly the source of a dark excitement and stimulation to him. Therefore, it is revealed that the separation of the Pervin brothers meant Fergusson’s disconnection from the little town: he was in a danger of losing reality in his life and its glow. Yet, whenever he contacts Mabel with his eyes, he is touched by some mystical element as if spellbound. It is obvious that this phenomenon is not a one-sided voyeurism from the description of how “She lifted her eyes, feeling him looking. Their eyes met. And each other looked again at once, *each feeling, in some way, found out by the other*” (EME: 144, my italics). Looking at her, Fergusson gains a sense of arousal as if he recovers consciousness:

It was portentous, her face. It seemed to mesmerize him. There was a heavy power in her eyes which laid hold of his whole being, as if he had drunk some powerful

drug. He had been feeling weak and done before. Now the life came back into him, he felt delivered from his own fretted, daily self. (*EME*: 144, my underlining)

The death-like girl ironically gives energy to the man. The inexpressible delivery of consciousness has already occurred at this moment, instead of narratable communication. Even though they do not converse, the spiritual crossing of existence steeps him in rapture and deserts him in the space between life and death. Being temporarily severed from his social self, he is released from his fixed perception of reality. This scene is a definite portent of his later transcendental experience.

The same sensation overcomes him again after he rescues Mabel and takes her home. He nurses a dread of the powerful force in her, and cannot take his eyes off her. The ecstatic mood makes her far from the same as the girl he knew before, which can hardly be explained by ordinary reason or morality. Although they are enclosed in the private space of the living room, it drastically changes into a place of encounter with the unknown other. The two of them communicate in this gap, incautiously and uncomfortably severed from daily life. These spiritual conveyances resemble the form of communication which Georges Bataille (1988) has envisaged. Bataille is known as a thinker who explores “inner experience”: one’s special experience of an ecstatic apex which can be attained by the sacrifice of reason and intelligence. Furthermore, he argues that a gift of ecstasy between people inside the laceration between life and death is precisely what renders communication possible.⁷ In the case of “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”, watching Mabel being in ecstasy and being forced into the sudden romance with her for whom he could never feel romantic attraction, Fergusson loses the coherence of his thoughts, involving a sacrifice of his previous identity and an experience of coming to life with an unknown self. Although it was Mabel who was first led to inner experience through reanimation, her ecstasy was not completed personally, but was wafted from her and transferred to Fergusson. The story demonstrates that the inner experience is not just for the subject who abandons his or her self, but has a profound power to open the way for attracting and communicating with the other. In response to Maurice Blanchot’s question of why he should not pursue his own inner experience, Bataille argues that all the more because “inner experience is conquest [for himself] and as such *for others*” (1988: 61), it can enable one truly to get

⁷ Bataille writes that “we reach ecstasy by a contestation of knowledge” (1988: 12) and “non-knowledge communicates ecstasy” (1988: 58).

out of one's self and become the other's consciousness itself. As I have suggested in the quotation from the pond scene, Fergusson finds himself positioned in the crevice between life and death in each encounter with Mabel. The gap, or laceration, between the forces of life and death, becomes the field of communication and it opens up a community which has been hindered due to the external reality in the cross-class romantic fiction.

Furthermore, comparing the quality and the extent of the characters' transformation, it is rather Fergusson's awakening than Mabel's which goes to extremes. Fergusson's consciousness was at first closely entangled with the external reality. The sense of shame originating from his vocational pride, agonized him: "The strange pain of his heart that was broken seemed to consume him. That he should love her! That this was love! That he should be ripped open in this way! – him, a doctor! – How they would all jeer if they knew! – It was agony to him to think they might know" (*EME*: 150). Bit by bit, however, he becomes unaware of the scent of death from the pond which lingers in his nostrils and the fear of the damage to his own health, and only mutters the words of love. And in contrast, Mabel feels horror at the spine-chilling condition of his wooing. "No, I want you, I want you,' was all he answered, blindly, with that terrible intonation which frightened her almost more than her horror lest he should *not* want her" (*EME*: 152, my underlining). On the other hand, although Mabel was temporarily in a state of absolute rapture, she gradually becomes disillusioned by the returning of her sense of reality. She is led to a sense of uneasiness: "'And my hair smells so horrible,' she murmured in distraction. 'And I'm so awful, I'm so awful! Oh, no, I'm too awful.' And she broke into bitter, heart-broken sobbing. 'You can't want to love me, I'm horrible'" (*EME*: 152).

Taking account of Fergusson's thorough alteration and of the fact that the story ends with the continuation of his transformed condition, it can definitely be judged that it is he who has truly awakened. What I suspect here is that the awakening from the suspended animation is not a genuine awakening as in the unfinished story "A Dream of Life" (1927). The narrator who recovers from a mystic sleep, experiences the vanishing of all of his physical senses, though nevertheless, he soon regains them and also his old senses of skepticism and horror. Similarly, in the case of Mabel, the epiphany caused by physical awakening is not maintained, and earthly consciousness and perceptions return to her. For this reason, the theory that the awakening results from physical sensation is

less credible than that of its having a mental or spiritual cause. Although it is generally considered that the state of epiphany is unsustainable, it seems that Lawrence has granted its endurance in the literary space of a short story which can deviate from realism. The fact that the story can be ended in the continuing resonance of a state of trance surely reveals the advantage of short stories. Lawrence thus attempts the immortalization of the epiphanic moment, and I assume that it is what “The Miracle”, which is the original title of “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”, really aims to achieve.

3. The role of tears as transmitting ecstasy

Tears are frequently used as a motif of women’s sexuality which affect male instincts in Lawrence’s fiction. For example, in several of his novels, women’s tears operate as a sexual tool to seduce men to express their compassionate affection. For example, Don Cipriano Viedma in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) sees Kate’s tears and finally utters the words of love to her, and Oliver Mellors in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1930), sees Constance’s tears when she picks up a hen’s egg and feels sorrow about the absence of her maternity and thus he feels a rush of affection. In both cases, the male characters yield themselves when they catch a glimpse of the feebleness of the heroines who have been equipped with the armor of haughty egos.

Furthermore, tears create a bridge between body and mind. In “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”, the tears which Mabel sheds are an outward manifestation of her inner alteration. Due to witnessing them, a change inside Fergusson has obviously been induced: “her eyes, which never left his face, slowly, slowly filled with tears. He watched the strange water rise in her eyes, like some slow fountain coming up. And his heart seemed to burn and melt away in his breast” (*EME*: 149). This is when the tears appear for the first time and it demonstrates the reason why their physical contact is not the immediate cause of the evocation of his tenderness. The next occasion is the scene in which Mabel’s tears flow again after kissing him.

In the curious naked pain of the thought he looked again to her. She was sitting there drooped into a muse. He saw a tear fall, and his heart flared hot. [...]

“Why are you crying?” he asked, in an altered voice.

She looked up at him, and behind her tears the consciousness of her situation for the first time brought a dark look of shame to her eyes.

“I’m not crying, really,” she said, watching him half frightened.

He reached his hand, and softly closed it on her bare arm.

“I love you! I love you!” he said in a soft, low, vibrating voice, unlike himself.
(*EME*: 150, my underlining)

As the underlined phrases indicate, this is the moment in which he has been conquered and altered. In contrast with Mabel who has become aware of her situation, he is precipitated into a deep intoxication with the chaotic ecstasy, filled with a strong affirmation. Therefore, tears work both as tools for expressing one’s ecstasy and as a means of stimulating communication. Bataille (1988) discusses this as follows:

If we didn’t know how to dramatize, we wouldn’t be able to leave ourselves. We would live isolated and turned in on our selves. But a sort of rupture – in anguish – leaves us at the limit of tears: in such a case we lose ourselves, we forget ourselves and communicate with an elusive beyond. (1988: 11)

As in Bataille’s words, Mabel’s tears are a specific tool of dramatization to explain her inner experience and this element has significantly affected Fergusson’s own inner experience.

There is an early short story by Lawrence entitled “Second-Best” which includes a miraculous moment of reconciliation induced by tears. A young lady whose name is Frances returns to her home village due to her lost love with Jimmy Barrass, who is an intelligent man living in the city. She confesses the story to her younger sister Anne, yet the way she talks is self-protective and she hides her inner ruefulness. Then, Anne finds a mole and kills it, regarding it as an unsacred animal that is harmful to the farm. After that, the sisters encounter a youth with a provincial accent, named Tom Smedley, whom Frances had been keeping as a second prospective lover. Meeting her after her long absence he gets excited, though he mildly banters that she cannot kill a mole – that is, she is a city girl who has lost her bond with the wilderness. As if incited by his words, Frances is prompted to a sudden and intense idea that she too can kill one. They subliminally though passionately tell one another that the act of killing a mole decisively will make him appreciate her real worth and it becomes a rite of passage which allows her to rejoin the rural community. The next day, she kills a mole by herself and goes to see him to show it. The depiction of Frances, triumphant and over-excited, and Tom, watching her with an astonishment which gradually turns into an ardent thrill, is extremely seductive, fierce, and unearthly:

“Did you think I couldn’t?” she asked, her face very near his.

“Nay, I didn’t know.”

She laughed in his face, a strange little laugh that caught her breath, all agitation and tears and recklessness of desire. He looked frightened and upset. She put her hand to his arm.

“Shall you go out wi’ me?” he asked, in a difficult, troubled tone.

She turned her face away, with a shaky laugh. The blood came up in him, strong, overmastering. He resisted it. But it drove him down, and he was carried away. Seeing the winsome, frail nape of her neck, fierce love came upon him for her, and tenderness. (*PO*: 120)

Harris (1984) notes that the girl’s killing the mole overlaps with killing her modernized self, which has been fostered in the city. However, she writes:

She must face life as it comes: moles must die [...]; and she must redirect her own life away from the man who could have been a pioneer to her soul toward good-humored, easy Tom. A day later she seals her pact with Tom and the view he represents by taking him a mole she herself has killed. (1984: 40)

In the prosaic assessment expressed in this quotation, the vividness of their ecstasy depicted at the end of the story is not focused on. The awkwardness between Frances and Tom in no way reflects her reluctance about or mild resignation to a second choice, but the pursuit of an opening to the unknown communication. As in “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”, Tom motivates Frances to go through the death of her old self to a new life, and due to resurrecting, she shows her uninhibited self to him, by demonstrating a bold action with a wild joy. And what proves the ecstasy is again the tears. When he recognizes the sign, a violent exultation fills his body and mind: the sight of the tears elevates him too from ordinariness to the height of ecstasy. The friction of their mutually discriminatory consciousness as a sophisticated townswoman and an unrefined countryman has been hindering them from accepting each other. However, rather than the fact of her bringing the dead mole, he was strongly stimulated, awestruck, and moved by seeing her exposing her submission to him by the ultimate release of her self. As a consequence of their ecstatic communication, they promise a hasty marriage and the story ends with “a thrill of pleasure in this death [of her self]” (*PO*: 120). Accordingly, tears visually show that one’s obstinate self has been flung off through being struck by inner alteration; thus, one appears as an unknown other before one’s lover. The significance of tears in the two stories hints at the possibility that the act of

touching does not have supreme importance in Lawrence's fiction. The spiritual conveyance of consciousness displays the miracle of the releasing of one's self to the other, more quickly than intelligence and actions.

4. Conclusion

In Lawrence's novels, a release and an enlightenment for the suffering human beings who are bound by their social egos is a theme which is repeatedly expressed. At the same time, however, due to deeply understanding the difficulty of achieving them, he realistically depicts the distress resulting from the intolerance of modern people who cannot face the other to the end. The short stories have the merit that these themes are developed in a more limited depiction of characters and plot than in longer novels, and can bear a condensed facet like a caricature. In those fictional worlds, the author has presented a hope in the series of communications of ecstasy which escape from the spell of the ego and overcome the feud between the sexes. Although the relationships have started from the impossibility of unity, the disparity or distance can be dissolved in an instant experience of epiphany and communication of ecstasy and sympathy. It seems that Lawrence intended to depict the beauty of the moment in contrast with the submerged daily lives of his characters. Through "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter", Lawrence has not only depicted the wonder of the personal inner alteration; he has delineated the depth of the true awakening which immensely changes the other's consciousness. As in the words of Bataille quoted earlier, Mabel's inner experience was the conquest "*for others*" (1988: 61), that is, Fergusson. Furthermore, what we understand from the tears of ecstasy, is that one receives a strong revelation by observing the unknown other, who exposes his or her weakness or submission. And the wildness of the act of exposure violently moves the observer. Epiphany and the communication of ecstasy are positive and wonderful techniques of expression which carve out a new horizon for the possibility of human beings' mutual reception in Lawrence's fictional world.

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